



MM 95-176

DESCRIPTION SERVICES FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

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Office of the Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20554

January 22, 1996

Ref: Report No. MM 95-115 (Audio Description)

Dear Secretary:

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I am the Executive Director of AudioVision® Inc. a nonprofit service agency that advocates and provides description services for the visually impaired. My personal involvement with audio description goes back to 1975 when my Master's thesis *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: An All-audio Adaptation of the Teleplay for the Blind and Visually Handicapped* was accepted at San Francisco State University. To my knowledge, this was the first formal documentation of "television for the blind." In 1990, I was awarded an Emmy for documenting "The Original Concept and Need for Television for the Visually Impaired." In the interim, AudioVision has described television programs ("WonderWorks"), movies, "Casablanca" and others, including an audio description demonstration at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, and theatre, events and exhibits in the San Francisco Bay area. We also provide training for audio description describers and writers, as well as conduct research into the effectiveness of audio description in education. (An abstract of our most recent research with visually impaired high school students is enclosed.)

I twice applied for funding from the U.S. Department of Education to develop audio description: in 1976 (to experiment with the medium) and again in 1992 (to establish a national mail order service for described videos). Both applications were denied. This lack of significant national funding has forced us to confine our efforts to describing local theatre in the Bay Area.

My comments will be directed toward implementing audio description for commercial primetime network television.

At the present time, *no commercial network television is being described*, even though the national Academy of Television Arts and Sciences has honored me and several others with Emmy Awards for our pioneering work in this emerging medium. The FCC is well aware of the importance of television in providing information and

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entertainment to the American public. The need to have information and entertainment brought into the home is essential for people with visual impairments, since mobility is a major obstacle to this population. The visually impaired are chronically under-employed and therefore have a pressing need for access to (free) commercial television (as opposed to cable or other forms of pay TV). The visually impaired want to experience and participate in the most popular TV programs, that is, primetime network programming. In my opinion, there is no better place to begin audio description on commercial television. We presently have the technology (SAP) and the descriptive methods and techniques. No further study is needed. *Commercial primetime network television should be audio described in its entirety, as soon as possible.*

The cost of audio description in this case should be borne by those at the beginning of the production chain: the program producers, with tax incentives provided by the federal government. The program descriptions can be provided by independent contractors, such as AudioVision, on a competitive bidding basis.

I urge the Commission not to waste any more time or funds in studies. My experience has convinced me that visually impaired individuals want and need this service; that it would be most adventitiously implemented in terms of acceptance and distribution in commercial primetime network television; that any funds allocated be solely dedicated to the actual production and distribution of audio described programming; and that the time act is now.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to comment on this most urgent matter, and for your work in providing access to media, education and the arts for our visually impaired citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregory Frazier".

Gregory Frazier
Executive Director

encl: brochure
research abstract
newspaper clipping

AUDIOVISION®
RESEARCH ABSTRACT

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AUDIO DESCRIPTION IN PROVIDING ACCESS
TO EDUCATIONAL AV MEDIA
FOR BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Principal Investigators

GREGORY FRAZIER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AUDIOVISION® INC.

IDA COUTINHO-JOHNSON
CO-DIRECTOR, AUDIOVISION® INC.



Preliminary research for this investigation showed that there are no formal methods and techniques presently being used in schools to provide access to educational audiovisual materials for visually impaired students. Each individual teacher must rely on his or her own ingenuity to make such materials accessible to these students. Methods and techniques exist, however, that can render audiovisual materials accessible and more comprehensible to visually impaired students in the classroom. One such technique, the use of audio description (AD), was the focus of this study.

In this study, the investigators presented the same segment of the same video to four groups of high school students (grades 10-12) during the Spring, 1992 and Fall, 1993 school semesters. A total of 100 students, consisting of 52 visually impaired (VI) mainstream students from California high schools and 48 sighted (S) students from a San Francisco, California high school, were selected initially to participate in the study. Of these, 40 were disqualified for various reasons and dropped from the study. The participating sample then constituted 30 visually impaired and 30 sighted students. Group VI-1 (N=15) viewed the video accompanied by an audio description of its contents. Group VI-2 (N=15) viewed the video without any audio description. Group S-1 (N=15) viewed the video accompanied by an audio description. Group S-2 (N=15) viewed the video without any audio description.

Immediately after viewing the video, all 100 students were asked to respond to a 22-item questionnaire consisting of 20 open end and multiple-choice questions that dealt with facts contained in the video. Two of the open-end questions were designed to determine the students' overall comprehension of the video's contents. The same, identical questionnaire was administered to each of the four groups.

Earlier work by the investigators in the development of audio description, and their belief in its ability to render an audiovisual event accessible to visually impaired audiences, led to the following hypotheses:

- The use of audio description would raise the average test score of a group of visually impaired (VI) students up to the level of a similar group of sighted (S) students.

- The use of audio description would produce, on the average, higher test scores for a group of VI students who viewed a video with such description than a group of similar VI students who viewed the same video without audio description.

- The average score of a group of sighted students who viewed a video with audio description would be higher than the average score of a group of sighted students who viewed the video without audio description.

All of these hypotheses were supported.

The major findings of this investigation were:

- The mean test score of the group of VI-1 students who viewed a video with AD exceeded the mean score of S-2 students who viewed a video without AD.

- The group of VI-1 students who viewed a video with AD scored markedly higher (Effect Size = 2.05) than the group of VI-2 students who viewed the video without AD.

- There was a slight increase in scores for the group of S-1 students who viewed a video with AD over a similar group of S-2 students who viewed the same video without AD.

Based on the above results, the investigators suggest that the increase in comprehension may be due to the audio description that was provided. It is hypothesized that such audio description provides access to visual information for visually impaired students that would otherwise be impossible for them to obtain from the original sound track of the video. Future investigation seems called for.

AUDIOVISION® RESEARCH

Means Chart

TABLE ONE MEAN SCORES FOR EACH OF THE FOUR GROUPS ON THE POSTTEST				
Statistic	VI-1 Viewed the video with AD	VI-2 Viewed the video without AD	S-1 Viewed the video with AD	S-2 Viewed the video without AD
Means	14.7	7.73	14.07	13.8
Standard Deviations	3.244482	3.4	2.267157	2.560382
Difference between VI-1 and other groups	-----	+6.97	+.63	+.9

As can be seen, the visually impaired group that viewed the video with AD (VI-1) did as well as the sighted group (S-1) who viewed the video with AD, and slightly better than the sighted group (S-2) who viewed the video without AD. Particularly impressive is the fact that they scored, on the average, overwhelmingly better (by almost seven points) than the other visually impaired group (VI-2) that viewed the video without AD.



Helping the Blind 'See' Films

By Peter Stack
Chronicle Staff Writer

Somewhere between yin and yang, said San Francisco Emmy award winner Gregory Frazier, lies the "difficult but beautiful art" of making television and movies more accessible to the blind. Frazier has pursued the idea for nearly 20 years — the United States has 12 million visually handicapped people who stand to benefit from his work.

Frazier is a pioneer in the fledgling field of description services for TV, films and live theater. Earlier this month, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences took the unusual step of awarding an Emmy to Frazier, a professor of communication arts at San Francisco State University.

The term "description services" applies to giving descriptions of what's occurring on the screen — nonintrusive descriptions sandwiched between dialogue and sound effects. The blind viewer listens to such descriptions on a special TV channel, or, in the case of film, earphones such as those provided to the hearing-impaired for some stage productions.

Like Closed Captioning

Frazier latched onto the process, which he said is "as old as blindness itself," when he was watching "High Noon" with a blind friend. The friend asked him what the film looked like. As Frazier described scenes in spare conversational style, his friend, he said, "literally awakened" to a new experience with the movie.

"It was one of the most exciting moments in my life," he recalls. "Most people we consider blind are not totally blind, most can discern darkness and may even see faint imagery. Many of the blind are old, and they tend to watch TV a lot. To enhance their viewing by having a voice description is a major step."

Frazier wrote a master's thesis at S.F. State on the subject of visual description, and met August Coppola, dean of the school of creative arts. Coppola had his own passionate interest in the subject,



BY JERRY TELFER/THE CHRONICLE

Gregory Frazier: an Emmy for making TV more accessible

having written extensively on tactile experiences. Coppola created the Exploratorium's Tactile Dome.

Description Institute

Grants from the San Francisco Foundation helped to start and maintain the AudioVision institute at S.F. State in 1987. The institute is dedicated to developing, promoting and teaching visual description services for TV, films and live theater.

"The description can't compete with the TV show or movie," said Frazier. "We're only there to cre-

ate a visual. The description then must be read by an experienced reader who knows how to deliver lines without being dull, but who also knows that to come on too strong may dramatize something the film maker never intended."

Explaining 'Casablanca'

Here's a familiar scene, for example, from the end of "Casablanca."

Describer: "Nighttime at the Casablanca airport. In dense fog, an airplane sits on the wet tarmac."

Rick: "Here's looking at you, kid."

Describer: "He lifts her chin, and they gaze into each other's eyes. Her mouth quivers and they both smile tenderly."

Descriptions have been recorded for "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" and "Tucker." Turner Entertainment is interested in applying descriptions to some of the classic films it owns. "Casablanca" has been "described" by Frazier's institute, and so has Errol Flynn's "Adventures of Robin Hood." There is talk of making a description track for "The Godfather III," set for release in December. Several PBS programs have been visually described, and the American Conservatory Theater offered the service at its performances of "A Christmas Carol" last year, with plans to repeat it this year.

AudioVision™

is a nonprofit corporation that advocates and provides description services for movies, videos, and television; theatrical plays, and musicals; educational media, exhibits, and environments, in order to make these media more accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.

How Does AudioVision™ Work?

A specially trained describer serves as a verbal camera, acting as "eyes" for the visually impaired person. Speaking during pauses in the narration or dialog, the describer provides essential visual information about the sets, characters and action, or about the exhibit or environment.

The descriptions are transmitted through earphones. For TV, the descriptions are broadcast on the second audio program (SAP) of stereo television.

AUDIOVISION™ SERVICES

☑ Writer-Describer Training

AudioVision trains people as descriptive writers and describers—people who work in theaters, museums, galleries, public parks. Sensitivity training to the special needs of the visually impaired is also included in the training.

☑ Research & Development

AudioVision strives to improve description services, by researching and developing methods, techniques and applications. One of AudioVision's major goals is to make educational audiovisual media more accessible to visually impaired youth.

☑ Business and Industry

Business and industry can be made more accessible to the visually impaired. Training manuals, industrial videos, building directories, floor-layouts and advertisements can be described to improve accessibility.

AudioVision offers consultation on description services to business and industry, with special emphasis on the accessibility provisions of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

☑ Demonstrations

As part of its advocacy work, AudioVision conducts informational demonstrations and speaking engagements for service organizations, educational institutions, the media, the general public and other interested groups.

The AudioVision™ Principals

Gregory Frazier, MA, Executive Director, was the first person to document the concept of "television for the blind" in his 1975 Master's thesis. He also taught the first college-level course in description services and was co-director of the AudioVision Institute at San Francisco State University.

In 1990 Mr. Frazier was awarded an Emmy for "The Original Concept and Need for Television for the Visually Impaired."

Co-Director **Ida Coutinho-Johnson, Ph.D.**, has a background in the fields of developmental psychology, special education, and medical and social anthropology. During the past 20 years she has worked with many multicultural, community-outreach programs, educating parents and professionals in the areas of early intervention and infant development.

Dr. Coutinho - Johnson, who lost her vision to retinitis pigmentosa, is also an advocate for the visually impaired.



RASHOMON

AN AUDIOVISION™ DESCRIPTION

Rashomon, Akira Kurosawa's film masterpiece set in feudal Japan, is a story told from four conflicting points of view. The film explores two universal themes: the relativity of truth and the subjective nature of human perception.

In this classic scene, running 2:34, the bandit Tajomaru first sees the beautiful wife Masago and her samurai husband Takehiro. This initial, brief and silent encounter brilliantly sets the stage for all that is to follow.

In this print demonstration the camera direc-

CAMERA DIRECTIONS

CU of Tajomaru, his eyes shut. Then, to the sound of the bell-like music, a fresh breeze stirs his hair; he opens his eyes, looks in the couples' direction, and gives a start.

CU of the woman, gently swinging with the movements of the horse; the camera tilts up to show her face as the veil is blown aside.

ECU of Tajomaru, now wide awake, looking.

CU of the woman on horseback (pan), her veil parting to reveal her face fully.

ECU. Tajomaru raises himself up.

MS from behind Tajomaru, now in a sitting position. Pan as the horse and couple move past him in the background. Tajomaru turns and looks after them, then sinks back under the tree as they continue to move farther down the road.

Rashomon still courtesy of Janus Films, New York. Camera text and still from the book *Rashomon. A Film by Akira Kurosawa*, ed. by Donald Richie and Robert Hughes, New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1969.



tions from the shooting script are juxtaposed with the AudioVision description.

Abbreviations: CU (Close Up); ECU (Extreme Close Up); MS (Medium Shot).

AUDIOVISION™ DESCRIPTION

Lying under a tree, eyes closed, Tajomaru stirs as a breeze fans his hair. Leaf shadows play across his face. He opens his eyes sleepily—then wakes with a start, eyes wide and staring. He sees...

...a woman's dainty sandaled feet. His gaze travels slowly up to her face.

The wind has blown her veil aside. He catches a fleeting glimpse of her face as she passes on horseback, led by her samurai husband. She is young, her features delicate, like fine porcelain. She gazes straight ahead, not seeing the bandit.

Staring intensely at the woman, Tajomaru raises up to a sitting position.

As the couple passes a few feet in front of him, the bandit rolls to one elbow, turning to follow them with his gaze. As they recede into the forest, he sinks back against the tree, legs sprawled. He pensively scratches his belly—then pulls his sword into his grasp.

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DESCRIPTION SERVICES FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

PROVIDING ACCESS
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MEDIA AND THE ARTS